DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 621 FL 800 266

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TITLE	Recruiting and Retaining Language Minority Students in Adult Literacy Programs. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education for Limited-English-Proficient Adults, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-FL-LE-90-06
PUB DATE	Aug 90
CONTRACT	RI89166001
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; *Adult Literacy; *English (Second Language); *Literacy Education; *School Holding Power; *Student Recruitment
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

As the nation has become aware of the scope of adult illiteracy and its tremendous cost, literacy programs have proliferated. New populations of language minority adults are becoming eligible for and involved in an increasing number of these programs. They include, among others, refugees whose training is no longer funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, and newly legal amnesty clients who have come into Adult Basic Education programs from classes conducted under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. It is necessary to consider how recruitment and retention of these and other students in literacy programs can be enhanced. (VWL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ERIC National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education
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Digest

Recruiting and Retaining Language Minority Students in Adult Literacy Programs

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August 1990
EDO-LE-90-06

As the nation has become aware of the scope of adult illiteracy and its tremendous cost, literacy programs have proliferated. New populations of language minority adults are becoming eligible for and involved in an increasing number of these programs. They include, among others, refugees whose training is no longer funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, and newly legal "amnesty" clients who have come into Adult Basic Education programs from classes conducted under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. How can recruitment and retention of these and other students in literacy programs be enhanced?

Recruitment

The most powerful tool for recruitment in education is still word-of-mouth publicity generated by satisfied students. Additionally, a variety of media approaches have been used to reach potential students, including radio and television announcements, newspaper articles on successful programs and students, and brochures distributed in neighborhood churches and shopping areas. Celebrations of student progress, to which former students are invited along with the families of the students who are being honored, also help establish a high profile in the community and enhance student self-esteem. In many sites, open-entry, year-round programs make it possible for clients to find classes whenever they are ready for them. Finally, systematic efforts to maintain contact with former students may bring "drop-outs" back to the program.

Attrition

Attrition has long been a problem in adult education. In fact, Cain and Whalen (1977) calculated an attrition rate of 40 to 60 percent for adult literacy programs in the United States. According to a study of attrition in urban literacy programs by Bean, Partanen, Wright, and Aaronson (1989), three kinds of factors contribute to attrition: those stemming from the student's personal situation; those attributable to the program or service provider; and external factors resulting from a lack of assistance from outside agencies in areas such as transportation and child care.

Personal factors

In Bean et al's 1989 study, most of the reasons cited by adults for dropping out of programs were personal in nature. The following are those most commonly designated.

Low self-esteem, coupled with lack of demonstrable progress. This may result from negative educational experiences. Bowren (1988) believes that the major cause for dropping out is lack of progress, real or perceived.

Daily pressures. Work schedule was the personal factor mentioned most frequently by students in the Bean et al (1989) study. A study by Taylor (1983) designated child-care needs and lack of transportation as the major obstacles to attendance.

Negative perception of the value of education (Cross, 1981). This included lack of support by the native culture for education and a family background of illiteracy.

Age. Older individuals may feel that at 45 or 50 they are too old to learn; such an attitude may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, if the risk of failure seems too great.

Program factors

When participants in Bean et al's study were asked what would have kept them in the program, most of the respondents cited the need for an increase in student-centeredness in program design and implementation. Current research on how adults learn shows their need to define or select their own goals. Other program factors that contribute to student-drop out include the following:

Lack of appropriate materials for very low level learners. Some students have such minimal English that the materials used in the program are not comprehensible.

Inappropriate placement. This may be caused by a discrepancy between the student's oral and literacy skill levels, or by use of an inappropriate testing instrument.

Lack of opportunity to achieve success. This may result from inappropriate placement, or from a failure to set short-term goals with opportunities for measurable progress.

Poor tutor/student or teacher/student match. A sensitive tutor/student match is very important, as is monitoring that relationship.

Lack of flexibility in class scheduling. Many adult students are juggling job, family, and other responsibilities, and need flexible school schedules.

Literates and nonliterates in the same class. This frequently results in lack of sufficient instructional time or individual attention for nonliterate students, who may have few independent learning strategies.

A poorly thought-out and executed intake process. Intake that is slow, cumbersome, and impersonal, and that often may include an intimidating test, can discourage students.

Lack of peer support and reinforcement. Adults who feel they are working alone, without the structured support of those who are like them and with whom they can identify, can become discouraged (see *Retention* below for further discussion).

Instructional material not relevant to students' needs and lives. Instructional materials that are too simplistic or that are of little relevance to the learners' life situations may insult learners and affect participation.

External factors

Literacy programs need to network with social service agencies to provide additional support services that enable adults to participate in classes on a regular basis. The

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following services are generally available in the community and should be accessed by the literacy program:

Health care (including eye exams and glasses);
Child care;
Transportation;
Counseling support.

Retention

Obviously, resolving the problems that contribute to attrition should enhance retention. Smith-Burke (1987) lists four key factors that serve as retention motivation for the adult literacy student: (1) peer support; (2) perceived progress in developing literacy skills; (3) heightened self-esteem; and (4) a good teacher. This section describes these factors in tutorial and group learning contexts.

Peer support

Peer support serves adult students' needs for socialization and interaction. A supportive peer group not only provides an effective component for learning, but also increases opportunities for individuals to participate in relatively risk-free small-group environments (as opposed to being "on the spot" in a tutor/student pairing). Peer counseling, buddy systems, class discussions, and cooperative learning are all examples of ways in which peer support groups can be shaped (Taylor, 1983). Group work has been judged so valuable that it can work to offset the problems associated with large classes.

Bean et al (1989) conclude that, "Programs may need to be more ready to move an individual from a one-on-one tutoring situation to a potentially more supportive group-learning environment." Perhaps a hybrid of peer support and individual attention should be considered in order to provide students with the strengths of both environments.

Perceived progress in developing literacy skills

A program, a teacher, or a student may set such ambitious long-term goals (e.g., to obtain a GED) that these goals are soon perceived by the student as unattainable, even if the teacher can see progress. If the teacher breaks tasks down into small, realistic chunks (e.g., write a simple sentence from dictation; locate the cause and effect in a GED social studies lesson) and students see the progress they are making, then the situation is likely to lead to perception of success. Feedback from the teacher or from peers can solidify this perception of progress and motivate continued involvement in the program.

Heightened self-esteem

Feeling good about oneself and one's capacity to learn grows naturally from the support of friendly peers and teacher/tutors and from students' perception of their own progress. Programs that understand adult learners' needs, treat learners with respect, give learners the opportunity to participate in ongoing goal setting, and endow them with the responsibility for their own learning, not only build learners' confidence in their own abilities, but also provide them with tools for independent learning.

A good teacher

"Retention is an indicator of quality teaching" (Taylor, 1983), and retention of teachers and tutors is an indicator of a quality program. Bean et al (1989) conclude that literacy programs need to provide training for their tutors to help them develop appropriate strategies to address the special educational, social, and emotional needs of adults who have not been successful at school. Programs that include language minority adults need to provide all this training and more; they also need to provide staff with cross-cultural training to help teachers understand culturally and linguistically diverse students and their special needs.

Students are not the only ones who need to experience success. A program that listens to the needs and concerns of its teachers and provides assistance quickly and in a supportive way can promote the sort of caring teaching/learning environment that is the basis of retention and accomplishment for teachers and students alike.

Conclusion

Successful literacy programs work because educators are listening carefully to students in order to help them define and work toward their own goals. They help students manage logistical problems that interfere with attendance and provide appropriate materials and mentors, while setting up learning tasks through which the students experience and are recognized for success.

"Most students will be inspired when they feel in control and secure in their classes, respected by their teachers and their peers, and hopeful about their future academic success" (Duryee, 1989).

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